

opening extract from

montmorency

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Chapter 1

1875: The Bloody Beginning

The pain woke him again. Not the constant throb that was so familiar he could hardly remember being without it. This was one of those sharp stabs from the wound along his thigh. Doctor Farcett had dug deep to get through to the shattered bone, and the layers of catgut stitching pulled as the torn flesh struggled to realign itself inside. After so many interventions by the keen young medic, Montmorency should have been prepared for the agony, but each time the after-effects seemed worse, and the limited pain relief (alcohol, and the occasional treat of an experimental gas) less effective.

The candle on the central table had burned almost to nothing: it must be nearly morning, but there was no sign of light

through the bars high up in the wall. Montmorency knew there was no point in calling for the night guard. Marston, silent, still, and unsmiling, saw his duties in the prison hospital as strictly limited to preventing escapes. Never mind the fact that Montmorency couldn't even turn over in bed, let alone run away. He'd have to wait in the dark for the arrival of Nurse Darnley, a brusque but well-meaning woman who believed that bad people could be made good and that providing a sip of water to a sick criminal might help that process.

In the meantime, as so often, Montmorency's memory threw up images from a year ago, of the night he was caught. He had hopped across the roof of the factory like an animal fleeing for its life. If he hadn't clung on to the bag of stolen tools, he might have seen the skylight window before his feet found it and he'd fallen through on to the hard iron frame of the grinding machine. He remembered the cold impact of metal against his skin, but nothing else until he'd heard people talking about him as if he wasn't there.

"I can assure you there will be no drain on

hospital funds. I will provide all necessary equipment and supervision."

It was a voice he later recognized as that of Robert Farcett, the surgeon who wanted to make a name for himself by saving Montmorency from his multiple injuries.

Montmorency could only imagine what had happened in the interim. No doubt the police, finding his distorted body in the factory, had been delighted that he had got what he deserved for his crime. A quick death would save the courts the trouble and expense of dealing with him. But he had defied their expectations, and his mangled form had been carried off to the teaching hospital near the bridge, where Doctor Farcett had seen him for the first time. The injuries had been grievous, but the body around them had clearly been athletic and strong.

Farcett was preparing a paper for the Royal College of Surgeons on the treatment of complex wounds. He had considered travelling to the Balkans, to find casualties of war so that he could illustrate his theories with real examples. Now, as he worked late amongst the puking poor of London, an ideal

subject lay before him. Without Farcett's help, the man would surely die. If he lived, Farcett's reputation might live on too.

So it was that the relationship between the doctor and the pitiful heap of bloodstained clothing had developed into a project. The creature didn't die. It survived long enough to become a man deemed fit to stand trial. He was charged under the name "Montmorency", which had been taken by the hospital staff from the brand name on the toolbag still clasped to his chest when the porters had carried him in. Two courtroom guards had to support him as he stood to hear the judge's sentence. Montmorency became convict 493 at the new prison, where the Governor was fascinated by Doctor Farcett's continuing efforts to rebuild his body. The Governor and the doctor took to meeting for dinner and an exchange of views about punishment and public health; agreeing on the need to attack crime by providing work, education and better sanitation for the families whose ignorance and squalor bred common criminals.

Doctor Farcett became a familiar figure at

the jail, and the Governor gave him permission to take Montmorency, under guard, to meetings in town where eminent or aspiring physicians and scientists told of their own achievements and wanted to hear about Farcett's pioneering techniques.

It was at those gatherings, sitting almost naked under a blanket at the back of the rostrum, that Montmorency learned as much as anyone present. Though ignored by everyone until it was time for his scars to be exhibited before them, he heard of major advances in medicine, engineering, mathematics and natural philosophy. An habitual thief, he continued to steal. With no pockets for his booty, he stole ideas and facts, committing to memory every detail of each lecture. He had no plans for putting the information to any use, but it interested him, and gave him something to think about in the long hours of drudgery in the prison workshop, or idleness in the infirmary after Doctor Farcett's operations.

As Montmorency lay there in pain on that dark, cold morning, he reflected on a long and, for him, rather eventful presentation by the Chief Engineer to the Metropolitan Board

of Works. Suddenly he had an idea. By the time Nurse Darnley was at his side with a battered tin mug, he had the makings of the scheme that would transform his life.

Chapter 2

Sir Joseph Bazalgette

The lecture had been about London's new sewerage system. For almost twenty years the capital had been scarred by the filth and inconvenience of road works and construction sites. Gangs of labourers had shovelled tons of earth, and made and laid millions of bricks to produce eighty-three miles of underground tunnels through which the smelly and dangerous waste of the city could be taken away to be dumped nearer to the mouth of the Thames. Now the enterprise was complete, and Sir Joseph Bazalgette, the man who had planned and supervised the work, proudly described the achievement that had won him international recognition, and a knighthood from the Queen.

Taking the stage at the Scientific Society, Sir Joseph was a mixture of confidence and

fear. He had a total command of his subject, but Montmorency could tell that he felt socially inferior to many of his audience, which included a couple of the more intelligent members of the House of Lords, as well as distinguished academics and a few visitors from abroad. Bazalgette was a short, neat man, with a thin nose and clever, dark eyes that seemed to be able to fix upon everyone in the room. His clothes were smart but fashionable: checked trousers and a plain jacket over a yellow waistcoat. His shirt collar was tied high at the neck with a silky cravat. A few strands of hair hopelessly tried to disguise the glistening baldness at the top of his head. Then suddenly, around his ears, his black locks grew rich and bushy, joining up via dainty sideburns with triangles of shiny, springy beard and a generous moustache. His chin was as bald as his head. Montmorency wondered why, when the rest of his face was so hairy, he bothered to shave that one little egg shape. Did he do it himself, or did he have someone else to judge exactly where the razor should go? And how often did he need to shave it? There was no sign of shadow, even though it

was six o'clock at night.

To get the meeting on to his side, Bazalgette opened his talk with a lighthearted explanation of his unusual name.

"French, originally, though my family has been here for three generations, and I'm proud to say that my father was an officer in the Royal Navy. But of course, through my work, I know all too well that human beings of all nationalities and classes have more similarities than differences — and that when it comes to their waste products, those of the nobility are just as noxious as those of the humblest peasant. It was for the good of all, great and small, that the Metropolitan Board of Works took upon itself the duty of disposing of that waste hygienically, endowing me with the honour, and, if I may say so, the privilege, of undertaking that task."

As Sir Joseph pointed out, everyone in the hall that night had reason to be thankful. Only a few years earlier that very building, for all its carved pillars and fine wood panelling, would have been a horrible place to spend an evening.

"As I made my way here this afternoon, I reflected on how conveniently located this great Scientific Society is. I came direct from the centre of town, and enjoyed my walk down towards the river. Children were playing in the streets. People were walking casually along the new Victoria Embankment, engaged in the harmless pleasure of taking the air. Yet many of you may remember how, not so long ago, a visit to this neighbourhood was to be avoided. How even the chambers of Parliament itself were rank with the stink of raw sewage in the Thames. The truth is that, as this city grew to become the heart of a glorious empire, the old sluices and underground rivers that our forefathers relied upon to keep it clean were overwhelmed. The new flushing toilets, so welcome in those lucky homes that owned them, completely overwhelmed those ancient drains, and across the capital citizens were losing their lives to diseases born out of filth. And that filth tried to escape the city in the only way it could: straight into the river that flows by us here. I venture to suggest that had I come here twenty years ago to exhibit my

original proposals, rather than to celebrate the completed scheme as I do now, my audience might have been rather smaller!"

The assembled scientists, politicians and interested laymen tittered politely. Then they settled back on the curved leather benches that enclosed the stage in a horseshoe, and Sir Joseph relaxed a little, ready to deliver the body of his lecture.

"Earlier, I mentioned the Embankments. And I am proud of those grand boulevards alongside the river. Indeed, I am delighted to announce to you today that we contemplate their illumination with the new Electric light within five years. But I urge you to turn your minds to what lies beneath. Not just to the underground trains that may have brought you here today. Not just to the gas pipes, which conduct to us the power to see so clearly in this hall. Not just to the water pipes which bring health and cleanliness along their path. Gentlemen, when you next find yourself strolling in the London streets, turn your eyes to the pavement, and look for the manholes that are the gateway to our new subterranean world. It is a world of giant tunnels, where thousands of gallons of

water and, as one might say, 'more solid waste' are coursing beneath your feet, hour after hour, on their way to the sea."

Sir Joseph produced a huge map showing the layout of the sewers. It was beautifully drawn and hand-coloured, mounted on a heavy board. Two porters were always on duty at the Scientific Society, ready to hold up or pass round specimens provided by visiting speakers. Usually they had to cope with nothing heavier than a brain in a jar, plants, or perhaps a stuffed animal brought back from exotic parts by some intrepid traveller. This map, taller than Sir Joseph himself, and almost as wide as the stage, was too much for them. They needed help, and Bazalgette motioned for Montmorency, who was sitting at the back of the stage waiting to be shown off in Doctor Farcett's talk, to come forward and assist them.

At the time Montmorency was more embarrassed than interested. As usual, for the purposes of the doctor's demonstration, he was dressed in nothing but the skimpiest of underwear, and although he was now accustomed to being displayed as an object in this state, he felt a fool standing there

with his arms in the air, helping to balance the unwieldy chart. To make things worse, Sir Joseph banged on the map with a long stick as he traced the passage of the filthy liquid on its way round London. Every time he struck the board it wobbled precariously, and Montmorency and the porters wobbled with it. Once, as Sir Joseph showed the dramatic underground voyage of an imaginary turd from Buckingham Palace via the Houses of Parliament and along the new Embankment, he hit the map so hard that all three men lurched dangerously near to the edge of the platform. Montmorency felt his pants starting to descend. There were sniggers from the back of the hall and out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Doctor Farcett with his head in his hands.